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ABSTRACT

Threats to teachers and students and acts of violence cause disruption in the normal functions of a typical school day by obstructing the learning process. Security in schools is a major concern. In the last few years, new research and procedures have expanded the issues of school violence. Studies have been conducted on the relationship between violent behavior and the exposure of normal progress of students with disabilities to certain factors at home, school, and the community. Educators must learn to cope with many factors that impact school violence such as fighting; violent behavior; weapons; harassment; vandalism; theft; and assault. This document discusses ways in which educators can deal with these factors. Courses such as positive decision-making and conflict resolution are now being fused into the curriculum. New school policies are being revised to restructure discipline procedures. Prevention programs are continuously being adapted for those with and without disabilities. (Contains 27 references.) (JDM)

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Strategies for Managing School Violence among Students with Disabilities

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Title: Strategies for managing school violence among students with disabilities

Abstract: No school, small or large, rich or poor, rural or urban, is immune to school violence. No student, with disabilities or normal progress, can be completely safe at school. Teachers and administrators may also be subjected to school violence. Threats and acts of violence may cause disruption in the normal functions of a typical school day by obstructing the learning process. Security in schools is a major concern. Security systems also are very expensive, and school administrators are faced with enormous financial obligations.

In the last few years, new research and procedures have expanded the issues of school violence. Studies have been conducted on the relationship between violent behavior and the exposure of normal progress and students with disabilities to certain factors at home, school, and the community. Educators must now learn to cope with the many factors that impact school violence such as fighting, volatile behavior, weapons, harassment, vandalism, theft, and assault. Courses such as positive decision-making and conflict resolution are now being fused into the curriculum. New school policies are being revised to restructure discipline procedures. And, prevention/intervention programs have been designed for students with disabilities and normal progress students.

School safety demands that schools work with other support systems to develop an integrated approach to safety in educational institutions. This aspect also applies to the inclusion process of special needs students. The curriculum must now incorporate all avenues of a well-rounded education including school safety. This resiliency to violence must be promoted in schools and homes.

The key to school safety is a comprehensive approach. School systems must integrate designs for safety into improvement, restructuring, and reform efforts. Schools, families, and communities must work together to assess students' and schools' needs. The two entities must work together to reduce factors that place students at risk of committing violence or becoming victims. Strategies that increase students' abilities to reduce or overcome the possible risks must be promoted.

Recent Statistics

A recent report, Violence and Discipline Problems in U. S. Public Schools: 1996 - 1997, (1999) released by the U. S. Department of Education in 1998, examined five-year trends by asking school principals to identify current problems in their schools as compared to the previous years. The results revealed the nation's poorest schools (75% of student population in poverty) improved in tardiness and absenteeism, physical conflicts among students, robbery, vandalism, alcohol/drug use, possession of weapons, and verbal/physical abuse of teachers.

Between 1990 - 1991, physical conflict declined from 40% to 20%; alcohol use declined from 12% to #%; drug use declined from 13% to 5%; physical abuse declined from 6% to 1%; verbal abuse declined from 24% to 13%.

The nation's "wealthiest" schools (20% or fewer students living in poverty) obtained results that

caused for concerns: a growing percentage of principals in affluent schools stated that tardiness, absenteeism, drug/tobacco use, and verbal abuse had become prevalent.

The improvement of academic achievement usually reduces disorderly and disruptive behavior. In the Violence and Discipline report, there was a direct link between school size and discipline problems. Principals in schools of 1,000 or more students were more likely to cite problems with students in such areas as physical conflicts, drug use and verbal abuse of teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998).

In a seven-year period, the National Center also revealed that the percentage of principals at large schools who identified these problems actually increased for several of the problem areas. Among principals of mid-size schools, the percentage citing these student problems decreased over five years in all categories except tardiness, drug use and tobacco use (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998).

In a joint study by the U. S. Department of Education and the Department of Justice, Students' Reports of School Crime: 1989 and 1995, revealed that the number of students who are likely to be victimized by a violent crime is increased .8 of one percent from 1989 to 1995. The study defined "violent crime" as a physical attack or a robbery using physical force, a weapon, or a verbal threat. The percentage of students who reported the presence of street gangs at school has also increased over the same period of time, from 15 percent to 28 percent.

The U. S. Department of Education's report of State Implementation of the Gun-Free Schools Act - School Year 1996 - 1997: Final Report 1998 outlined the results of the states' efforts to enforce zero-tolerance policies for weapons violations. They revealed that 6,093 students were expelled in 1996 - 1997 for bringing weapons to school. The majority of the expulsions, 58 percent,

were for students who brought handguns to school, 35 percent were for other types of firearms, including bombs, grenades, or starter pistols, and 7 percent involved rifles or shotguns. The majority of expulsions (56 percent) were from high schools, 34 percent were from junior high and middle schools, and 9 percent were from elementary schools. An example of the crimes involving special education students comes from South Carolina. In the 1998-1999 school year, there were 9, 979 crimes involving special education students, and 14.5 percent or 1445 of those crimes included special education students as perpetrators. While only 1.8 percent or 185 were victims in those crimes (South Carolina State Department of Education, 1999).

Discipline of Special Needs Students

The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 incorporated amendments to the original regulations in regards to discipline of students enrolled in special education programs. Prior to the revised mandate, the statute only addressed the issue of discipline in a provision that allowed school officials to remove a child to an interim alternative educational placement for up to 45 days if the student brought a gun to school or a school function. The amendment incorporates prior court decisions and specific stipulations.

Schools could remove a child with disabilities for up to ten school days at a time for any violation of school rules as long as there was not a pattern of removals. A child with a disability could not be subjected to a long-term suspension or expulsion from school for behavior that was a manifestation of his or her disability. Services must continue for children with disabilities who are suspended or expelled from school.

The authority of school personnel was expanded regarding the removal of a child who brings a gun to school, to also apply to all dangerous weapons, and to the knowing possession of illegal

drugs or the sale or solicitation of the sale of controlled substances. Schools have the ability to request a hearing officer to remove a child for up to 45 days if keeping the child in his or her current placement is substantially likely to result in injury to the child or to others (Center for Effective Collaboration, 1998).

Schools also are required to assess a child's inappropriate behavior and develop positive behavioral interventions to address that behavior, also describe how to determine whether the behavior was a manifestation of the child's disability (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 1997). The regulations also stipulate that schools may remove a child with a disability for up to ten school days, and for additional removals of up to ten school days for separate acts of misconduct, as long as the removals do not constitute a pattern.

However, schools are not required to provide services during the first ten school days of removal. During any subsequent removal that is for ten school days or less, schools provide services to the extent determined necessary to enable the child to appropriately progress in the general curriculum and advance toward meeting goals of Individualized Educational Program (IEP). In cases involving removals for ten school days or less, school personnel, in consultation with the child's special education teacher, make the service determination.

During any long-term removal for behavior that is not a manifestation of a child's disability, schools provide services to the extent determined necessary to enable the child to appropriately progress in the general curriculum and appropriately advance toward achieving the goals of his/her IEP. In cases involving removals for behavior that is not a manifestation of the child disability, the child's IEP team makes the service determination.

Meetings of a child's IEP team occur to develop a behavioral assessment plan, or to review

the child's behavioral intervention plan. These meetings are required when the child has first been removed from his/her current placement for more than ten school days in a school year. They also occur when implementing a movement that has caused a change of placement. If other subsequent movements occur, the IEP team members review the child's behavioral intervention plan and it's implementation to determine if modifications are necessary, and only meet if one or more team members believe that modifications are necessary.

The regulations provide that a change of placement may occur if a child is removed for more than ten consecutive school days or is subjected to a series of removals that constitute a pattern of more than ten school days in a school year. Also because of factors such as length of each removal, the total amount of time the child is removed, and the proximity of the removals to one another. Manifestation determinations are only required if a school is implementing a removal that constitutes a change of placement.

Legislation and Litigation Among Disabled Children and Adolescents

Originally in the history of education, students with disabilities (special needs) were excluded from any form of public education. Traditionally, special needs students have been confined and isolated from regular education students in self-contained settings. Presently, schools have focused on "inclusion" as an alternative to the self-contained education of special needs students. This evolution was a slow process. It is a direct result of legislation and litigation concerning individuals with disabilities. Federal, state laws, and litigation, reflect the government's commitment to ensure the rights of all children to a free and appropriate education.

Several laws were established to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities. The first law protecting the rights of persons with disabilities was Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

(Rehabilitation Act, 1973). Section 504 prohibits discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance. The law states that no qualified disabled person shall be excluded from participation in educational activities. Additionally, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) gave assurances that: a) a free appropriate education was available to every disabled person between the ages of 3 and 21, b) guaranteed the rights of disabled individuals were protected, c) assisted state and local units in providing appropriate, and d) assessed the effectiveness of efforts to provide appropriate programs (Education for all Handicapped Children Act, 1975). Finally, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (1997), a renaming of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, entitled individuals with disabilities to receive a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment.

In addition to legislation, litigation has helped to propel the rights of special needs students. Perhaps the most famous is Brown v. Board of Education in which the U. S. Supreme Court ruled that "separate but equal" had no place in the public education arena (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954). Moreover, Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania brought constitutional challenges on behalf of disabled children. It contended that that the rights of disabled children were violated under the equal protection and the due process clauses of the 14th Amendment. It provided a basis to challenge exclusion from school and misclassification of children with disabilities (Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1972). In another landmark case, Mills v. District of Columbia Board, the District of Columbia's court ruled that all children were entitled to a special education disciplinary ruling under the equal protection and due process clauses of the Constitution (Mills v. Board of Education, 1972).

The law and cases reviewed have enabled students with disabilities to receive a free, appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. Currently, many schools are allowing students with disabilities the chance to be educated in a regular school setting, as opposed to a self-contained placement. The freedom has afforded the population with disabilities an opportunity to assume the responsibilities of adulthood immediately after graduating from high school. The regular education setting has become the least restrictive environment for special needs students. Through federal/state governments and our courts, specials needs students are allowed a purposeful, relevant learning experience that prepares them for a productive life beyond high school.

Parental Perspectives

Every parent wants his or her child to be educated in a safe, drug-free environment. All students have the right to be educated in a safe learning environment. Any student who brings a gun or firearm to school or to a school related function posses a threat to the school community. Schools can immediately remove these students from their current educational program. At the same time, alternative programs, appropriate supports, and services such as educational, psychological, and mental health services should be provided. They should focus on improved educational and mental health outcomes for the student. These outcomes would allow students to: (a) transfer back into their regular school, if appropriate; (b) meet stated educational standards; (c) graduate with a diploma; and (d) become a productive, tax-paying citizen. If a child is suspended or expelled because he or she brought a gun or firearm to school or to a school function, it is the responsibility of both the school and community to ensure that positive alternative programs, services, and supports are provided to that student.

Generally, federal legislation stipulates that school organizational procedures be designed in

such a way as to give parents every opportunity to participate in the decisions that affect he educational programs for their children, from which a policy of parental involvement has grown over the years. The trend toward site-based management also incorporates the intention to broaden the authority of teachers and parents, students, and others in the community (David, 1989). In the area of special education, the administrator must make sure that all parental communications are conducted in a professional manner so as to fulfill not only the letter of the legislation, but also the spirit of parental involvement, as mandated in federal law. This may be a minimum requirement.

The impact of legislation on the lives of families has been extremely important. Parents now have the right to their child's records and procedural due process rights. They must also be notified and give permission before their child can be removed from a general class setting and placed in a special setting. The quality of education for the children has vastly improved, giving everyone in the family the hope of a higher quality of life. Parents are now part of a team for developing a plan for their child. They offer feedback on the child's progress and have an opportunity to become in his or her education. Family plans are developed early, and the whole family learns to address the needs of the special child. If no outside interventions are given to a student that is expelled or suspended, the juvenile crime problem will only get worse (South Carolina State Department of Education,1992). Leaving suspended or expelled students free to roam the streets without supervision is a prescription for increasing juvenile crime. Instead of holding students accountable for their actions, it rewards students with a free pass to truancy and exports the problem from these schools to the community at large. Whether the offense is related or not to the disability becomes the major concern for parents. Parents feel that there are disparities in the punishment that is given to regular versus a special needs student. That is where the problem lies. Communication of

punishment as it relates to the needs of student with disability is the key to alleviating any confrontations or disagreements with a parent and community.

Lareau (1989) found that the differences in relationship of school personnel to parents are associated with the social class of the parents. Most importantly, Lareau (1989) reported that most schools seem to want one-way communication where parents receive instructions from school personnel, but they do not accept directions from parents. Although teachers report that they want more parent involvement and ask for it, especially in the early years of schooling, they do not want a partnership. Laureau reported that a more accurate description is a professional-client relationship, where teachers want to control the amount of "interconnectedness" between home and school. Many administrators may take the same view, perhaps even more so.

Though parents of a child with disabilities obviously want the school to provide the most appropriate education for their children. However, oweverHol they often are not knowledgeable about the proper procedures to follow. They may have been mistreated by school employees and thus become frustrated and angry. This hostility can be misinterpreted by school personnel and can lead to antagonistic, nonproductive parent-school relationships. An understanding of the parent's point of view can help administrators deal more effectively with all types of parent behavior and create organizational procedures to make the parents feel more trusting in their interactions with the school.

Luneburg and Ornstein (1991) have identified four barriers to effective communications. One is inappropriate "frame of reference" where messages are ineffective because of unintentional distortions of the message between people. Another barrier is filtering where changes in information is "filtered" from one level to another. For example, administrators and subordinates have different

perceptions of statements. In communicating with parents, it is possible to filter information again, unless primary documents are used. The structure of communication or the climate of communication can also have adverse effects on the success of communication. Thus, the more people who are directly involved in face-to-face meetings, the more accurate will be the information. And semantics, or different meanings for the words, also may present a barrier, particularly if educational jargon is used. For example, one parent was concerned that his child would be harmed if given a "battery" of tests, apparently understanding battery to be similar to electric shock treatment.

Dealing with anger is never pleasant; however, the administrator must anticipate the potential for parents to become angry and be prepared to deal with both the anger and its potential effects. An inability to do so could have profound negative effects on all those present during the confrontation, on the future effectiveness of the administrator, and on the relationship between the parents and the school. Parents, who conclude that the school has not or will not provide the special placement they believe their child needs, feel protective and defensive about their child. They may experience frustration because they believe that they have tried everything, to no avail. Or they may feel self-righteous because they believe that their positions are the right ones supported by PL 94-142 and IDEA (PL 94-142, 1975). All of these feelings may have been building for some time. Then, they are released unpredictably in the form of anger (Podemski & Childers, 1986).

Stay calm. Do not reciprocate with anger, thereby losing personal control of the situation. Anger by the administrator will reinforce the parent's behavior and cause the situation to get out of hand. Be as gentle and honest as possible. The administrator must maintain self-control, thus helping the parent regain personal control and self-respect.

As long as there is no potential of violence, allow the parent to release the pent-up emotion. This catharsis is often all that the parent needs to bring the anger under control.

Do not take the anger personally. Remember that the anger is a display of the parent's frustration and a plea for understanding and help.

Attend and visually focus on the parent. Non-attentive behavior, such as looking away to trying to look busy, will only incite the parent's anger further.

After the parent has calmed down, acknowledge the anger using carefully selected words that accurately describe the intensity of the anger. Do not over-dramatize the situation by indicating that the display of anger was worse than it actually was.

Work with the parent to identify the cause of the anger, and deal with the cause rather than the angry behavior itself. The parent specifies the facts of the situation as the parent sees it. Then, the problem is defined on the basis of the facts and explored by the alternative solutions to the problem (Podemski & Childers, 1986).

After the incident is over, follow up on the discussion, maintaining contact with the parent while attempting to solve the problem. Administrators also involve their teachers in role-playing situations dealing with parental anger. They begin to know how to anticipate such behavior and deal effectively with it (Podemski & Childers, 1986).

As administrators and teachers learn to empathize with the feelings and motivations of parents of children with disabilities, they are in a better position to deal effectively with parental anxiety and concern for the child's educational welfare. The special education administrators should offer staff development training and other opportunities for the staff to develop this sensitivity to the parental perspective. This will be most important in inclusion settings where regular teachers will

increasingly work with children with disabilities and their parents.

Prevention Strategies

Halbig (2000), president and CEO of the National Institute for School and Workplace Safety, focused on the empowering "code of silence" that is circulating in today's schools. He emphasized that it is imperative for educators to find techniques to break the barrier of silence which indirectly contributes to school violence.

Halbig (2000) believes that no numbers of metal detectors placed in schools could be as effective as students informing school officials of the presence of handguns on campus. He further states that preventive programs have to center around tactics to break the "code of silence." The U. S. Department of Education reported that more than 6,000 handguns were confiscated from students on school grounds during the 1996 - 1997 school year. And in 92 percent of the cases, the guns were appropriated because students alerted school officials. Many school districts have implemented hotlines for students and citizens to alert officials of potentially violent elements in schools. It is important to emphasize that parents can support school officials in helping students break the student "code of silence" about school violence.

Another initiative to address school violence is the development of character education programs. These programs focus on values of courage, caring and responsibility. Critics of the program believe that morals and values should be introduced in the homes as opposed to the classroom. Halbig (2000) believes that character education programs could support the effort to break the code of silence by helping students to better understand that staying silent is cowardly, uncaring and irresponsible.

A popular problem-solving model used by police departments and schools is SARA, an

acronym for Scanning, Analysis, Response, and Assessment (Gavin, 2000). The scanning phase involves reviewing police reports and student disciplinary files from the school. The analysis phase offers a review and interpretation of obtained data to develop a response plan. After a response is implemented, a final assessment is conducted show whether responses were appropriate, meaningful and successful. The program was successfully utilized in one of the largest schools in St. Petersburg, Florida. The intent of the resource officer was to decrease the number of fights on campus. After reviewing the disciplinary files and police reports in the first phase, the officer analyzes that a third of the fights occurred in the school hallways. He also found that special education students represented 27 percent of those disciplined for fighting, even though they were only 14 percent of the school's enrollment. Students in a special dropout-prevention program made up 22 percent of the students involved in fights, but represented only 13 percent of the student body.

After conducting a complete analysis, the data revealed that 6 percent of the fights occurred in the cafeteria. The officer noticed, upon review, that here was extra adult supervision in the cafeteria to prevent most fights. Staff members usually intervened immediately when two students are in the initial stages of a disagreement. As a result, the officer and the principal relied on staff presence as a preventive strategy. Since the hallways were identified as the most popular spot for fights, more coverage was placed there at designated times. The assessment phase revealed that the total number of fights in the hallways decreased 64 percent (Gavin, 2000).

Stephens (1998) states that it is virtually impossible for school officials alone to keep schools safe. As a result, it is important for alliances to be created with law enforcement, district attorneys, probation departments, juvenile court judges, and social welfare agencies. "Joint powers agreements" (Stephens, 1998) and workable crisis management plans can be established to address the individual

needs of young people.

Schools that provide a focus on academics, positive and healthy relationships, and a safe, secure environment make students feel positively about themselves. Early Warning: Timely Response, published by the U. S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice, offers several suggestions to establish a school that is safe and responsive to all children:

(1) Focus on academic achievement by conveying the attitude that all children can achieve and behave properly, while also appreciating individual differences.

(2) Involve families in meaningful ways by making them feel welcome, addressing concerns or barriers for non-attendance and keeping them positively engaged in school functions.

(3) Develop links to the community by establishing a commitment to improving schools with available resources.

(4) Emphasize positive relationships among students and staff by providing adult role models to offer guidance, support and direction.

(5) Discuss safety issues openly and create ways for students to feel safe sharing their concerns.

(6) Treat students with equal respect, regardless of ethnicity, gender, race, social class, religion, disability, nationality, sexual orientation or physical appearance.

(7) Provide a system for referring students who are suspected of being abused or neglected, adhering to federal and state guidelines.

(8) Offer extended day programs for children who are well supervised and provide support through counseling, tutoring, mentoring, cultural arts, community service, clubs, and access to computers.

(9) Promote good citizenship and character by reinforcing shared values of the nation and the local community; parents are still the primary moral educators of their children.

(10) Provide a support team of assistance for students to successfully make the transition to adult life and workplace.

Most prevention programs in effective schools recognize these safety factors are directly related to a child's social, emotional, and academic development (Dwyer, Osher & Warger, 1998).

Conclusion

Isolated and widespread incidents of school violence have become increasingly prevalent in the past few years. Schools are no longer portrayed as a "safe havens" for young people who are threatened by acts of violence on the streets. Any student, any school, and any city may become a statistic for an occurrence of violence on a daily basis. Much emphasis has been placed on strategies to cope with the aftermath of a crisis. Proactive strategies are necessary to implement and address a plan before an incident of violence occurs.

Schools serving students with special needs are required by law to follow an established IEP when addressing student behavior. Much time and effort have been taken to analyze the special needs child's educational, psychological and social characteristics to obtain a plan of action for addressing specific needs and concerns. If a violent act were to occur involving this student, school officials would, in all likelihood, have been warned and better prepared to respond. Unfortunately, many students who commit violent acts in the regular education curriculum exhibit warning signs that are often unnoticed. There might have been a slight possibility to alleviate the violent act if the warning signs had been identified and addressed.

Suspension or expulsion is a problematic issue with any student, but is especially

controversial when the student is diagnosed with a disability. Specifically, the consideration is that an extreme form of discipline that should not be used casually or extensively. In every situation, the impact that the suspension or expulsion will have upon the child should always take precedence in decisions.

The implications presented in this paper focus on the belief that schools cannot discipline students with disabilities in the same way that non-disabled students are disciplined. The key is to determine if the inappropriate behaviors exhibited by the students with disabilities are in any way related to the disability. This is the first determination that must be decided by school personnel. Once this has been determined, due process procedures must be followed.

Managing the possibilities of violent acts on school campuses is the responsibility of all individuals who possess a vested interest in children. There must be a unified effort to implement a strategic plan that focuses on identification of youths that are troubled and lack guidance and support. The community, agencies and organizations, parents, school officials/staff and students should provide a network to address the possible occurrences of school violence. Violent acts do not occur within a specific population of students. All students deserve the right to feel safe and secure at an educational institution.

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Endnotes

1. Others who shared the writing of this paper are: Bruce Bates, Yvonne Bradley, Ovanual Bush, Tujuana Bush, Maebell Shaw-Castle, Lois Cunningham, Wayne Frazier, Harry Frinks, Dorothy Gallman, Sonya Granger, Alice Grice, Tracy Haigler, Isaac Lee, Bertha McCants, Cynthia McClorin, Valerie McGahee, Joe Moore, William Sandifer, Lafayette Stewart, Ernestine Thomas, and Clint Walker. Dorothy Gallman was the editor-in-chief.